

Personality

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The sermon explores the nature of personality through self-consciousness, self-grasp, self-estimate, and self-decision, emphasizing the ethical implications of personal development.

Scripture: Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:13, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 2:11, Philippians 2:3, James 1:22

Topics: "Personal Identity", "Moral Responsibility"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the concept of personality, emphasizing the importance of self-consciousness, self-grasp, self-estimate, and self-decision in defining what it means to be a person. He explores the process of personal development, starting from self-separation to the culmination in self-decision, highlighting the complexity and significance of individual identity and moral responsibility. Curtis challenges the notion of doubting one's existence and the invasion of consciousness, pointing towards the dual nature of human life and the struggle to achieve personal mastery amidst conflicting elements. He concludes by defining a person as one capable of self-conscious decision, navigating the journey towards personal growth and moral character.

Transcript

Man is but a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. It is not necessary that the entire universe arm itself to crush him. A breath of air, a drop of water, suffices to kill him. But were the universe to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which kills him, because he knows that he dies, and the universe knows nothing of the advantage it has over him.

-Pascal, Thoughts, xviii, xi.

We here found that consciousness, when deeply scrutinized, is an act of opposition put forth against our sensations; that our sensations are invaded and impaired by an act of resistance which breaks up their monopolizing dominion, and in the room of the sensation thus partially displaced realizes man's personality, a new center of activity known to each individual by the name I; a word which, when rightly construed, stands as the exponent of our violation of the causal nexus of nature, and of our consequent emancipation there from.

-- James Frederick Ferrier, Philosophical Works, iii, 207.

Among all the errors of the human mind, it has always seemed to me the strangest that it could come to doubt its own existence, of which alone it has direct experience; or to take it at second hand as the product of an external nature which is known only indirectly, only by means of the very mind to which we would fain deny existence.

-- Hermann Lotze, *Microcosmus*, Clark, i, 263.

In his fragmentary book, *Facts and Comments*, Herbert Spencer notes a psychological problem. It is suggested to him by those "invading melodies" - "often those vulgar ones originating in music halls and repeated by street pianos" -- which lodge in the consciousness and are not easily expelled. Probably we all recognize his fact -- we have had our own attention to higher things impaired by the insistence of some prowling tune! This humiliating invasion, Mr. Spencer thinks, throws an important side-light on the dispute concerning the Ego, and renders dubious the contention that there is an innate knowledge of personality. For, he asks, if there is a distinct person, a central self, how will you explain this invasion? You cannot relate it to the unit of the Ego; and if the rebellious thing cannot be unified with the Ego, what is it? In a word, how can there be any unitary person when there is no harmony in consciousness?

This skeptical puzzle would be amusing were it not so extremely pathetic. It is something as if a man in crossing Brooklyn Bridge should begin to doubt the existence of the bridge, the one thing which enabled him to be up there at all! Mr. Spencer's annoyance, his effort to expel the "invading melodies," his quick discernment of the psychological problem -- yes, his very doubt itself -- would be impossible were he himself nothing but an incoherent series of conscious momenta, "a loose bundle of mental states." There could be no realization of the flying and conflicting elements of consciousness were there not over against all these an abiding point of personal unity. Paradoxical as it is, personality is never more largely evident than it is when we begin to doubt its existence.

Herbert Spencer's primary failure, a failure vitiating his entire system of philosophy, lies in this one thing: He is never true to man's total experience. Every man has a dual life. There is a coherent side and an incoherent side. In this very instance, the invasion cited, there is plain duality. The man, when invaded, is just as conscious of himself trying to expel the prowling tune as he is of the invasion itself. Then, why not say so? A philosopher ought to be true to both sides of man's experience; he has no right to cover up one side, or to neglect one side; he has no right to explain one side at the expense of the other. Real philosophy is at the root an ethical matter. It demands that we cherish all reality; that we treat every fact as if it had come, like a shining spark, from the Moral Law.

This primary failure leads to another failure. Mr. Spencer is unable to appreciate the significance of the difference between the being conscious of things and the being conscious of self. When merely conscious of things, a man is, like an animal, a bare individual in automatic response to all the influences which reach him. As Dr. James E. Latimer once said, "Nature passes through him unhindered as water passes through a spout." This individual response is, I repeat, automatic, as much so as when a locomotive instantly "shivers" at the first move of the lever. Not only sensations, emotions, individualistic tempers are automatic; but even thoughts and volitions may be automatic also. Man is a highly sensitive machine, that is all, save in those upper moods when he is conscious of himself. And even then he is only "an inhabited machine." This self-consciousness, admittedly, gets its psychological inception in ordinary consciousness; but there is no unitary worth, no personality, until self is held in consciousness with such clarity as to provide a new, personal purchase for the leverage of the will. And even now, with self clearly seized, there is only a beginning in personal life. In self-consciousness there is a point of unity; but it is, at first, a bare

point, not only subject to such invasions as disturbed Mr. Spencer, but now and again violently and completely overwhelmed. And the surprising torment of the matter is that a man must be both the individual and the person, and so on both sides of his own battle. In the striking words of Hegel, a man is "both the fighter and the fight itself." And it is this very peculiarity which makes human life so profoundly sad, often so profoundly tragic, and yet so martially glorious. If we tried in one swift sentence to sum up the first inner meaning of man's life, we could hardly say a better thing than this: To personalize the entire individual. This personal mastery of the individual cannot be completed in this world; but we can begin, and then with God's help do more and more. It is like a man who "preempts a claim" on one of our Western prairies. At first the settler is there with only one point of civilization—a stake fixed in the ground. Then he clears out the tangle for a dooryard; then he builds a cabin large enough for a home; then he enters into a long, weary, unyielding struggle, until the man is master of the wilderness!

Analysis of Personality

In psychology it is often taught that personality is grounded in the power to become self-conscious. This is true, but self-consciousness itself requires the most searching analysis. In such a close analysis, we find two features. The first I will name self-grasp; the second, self-estimate.

Consideration of Self-grasp. Looking at man's attainment of personality as a process, the preparatory thing in the personal process is the start in emancipation from the dominion of nature. In how low a phase of animal consciousness this self-severance from nature begins, we do not know. One modern philosopher says, "The crushed worm writhing in pain undoubtedly distinguishes its own suffering from the rest of the world." "Undoubtedly" is a rather strong word here; but, however it may be with the worm, the higher animals do, undoubtedly, make a distinction between subject and object. When, for example, the ponies in the Fife mines steal and open the miners' piece-boxes, eat the bread and jam, and then carefully return the boxes, each box to its proper place, these ponies can hardly be considered as mixing up the miners, the boxes, the food, and themselves in one opaque clutter. But this ability to distinguish between subject and object does not amount to personality -- is really no element of personality. Certainly it is the beginning of a movement toward personality; but it is only the end of the personal process which has the quality of personality. A man just starting up the Mount Washington road, eight miles long, is surely on that particular road; but he has no more of the summit-experience than has a man fast mired in a distant swamp. And it remains to be seen whether our man on the mountain road shall prove himself to be enough of a climber to achieve the vision at the top of the mountain. So this Fife pony can be scientifically regarded as in the personal process, but he is not thereby a person; indeed, for all practical discussion of reality, he is no nearer personality than is a juniper tree. All this needs to be firmly said because the tendency now is to cheapen personality in the name of a more scientific study of the animal world.

By this term "self-grasp," then; I mean much more than self-severance from nature -- I mean such a complete self-severance that the man can fully seize himself, can hold himself distinctly and steadily at the central blaze of his vision, can think his way clear around himself. "I lifted myself up out of the underbrush and said, 'There, there you are.'" In simple formula, the state of consciousness in self-grasp may be expressed thus: "I am not this -- nor this -- nor all these -- I am simply I myself."

In a passage of *In Memoriam* (XLIV) Tennyson has remarkably sung the truth, exactly what I mean by personal self-grasp:

"The baby new to earth and sky,

What time his tender palm is prest
Against the circle of the breast,
Has never thought that 'This is I.'
"But as he grows he gathers much
And learns the use of 'I' and 'me,'
And finds, 'I am not what I see
And other than the things I touch.'
"So rounds he to a separate mind
From whence clear memory may begin,
And through the frame that binds him in
His isolation grows defined."

Consideration of Self-estimate. In grasping self, though, however strong the grasp, there is no finished import. The personal worth of the seizure lies in the fact that it renders inevitable some estimate of self. When I realize that I am "other than the things I touch," I also, in the very act, discern a certain peculiarity in myself. This discernment of self-peculiarity is the basis of all self-judgment? Right here allow me to hold our discussion for a moment of emphasis. Do you not see a long out-sweep from this point where a person discovers a peculiarity in himself? It is just now that we first hear the breaking surf of the mighty deep of moral concern! Not that this incipient self-valuation is moral at all, but it prepares the way for a personal sense of responsibility under ethical demand. Were a man unable to perceive any peculiarity of self, he could never judge himself over against an ideal, and so could never feel responsibility toward the right, and so could never acquire moral character.

Of course, this estimate of self is a changing, a growing thing -- is, in truth, never absolutely perfect. Surprise after surprise awaits every man, especially at any crisis of his life, when the unsounded mystery of his individual being flings to the surface new things or new combinations. Phillips Brooks once said (I condense it): "My future is to me a perpetual curiosity because I know so little about myself." But this imperfection of self-estimate matters not greatly, for all we now need is such an estimate as will provide for the on-going of the personal and moral life. We are not here seeking a perfect individual, or even a perfect person, but simply a real person. In convenient phrase, the state of consciousness in self-estimate may be expressed thus: "I am not like this-nor like this-nor like any of these-this is what I am."

Consideration of Self-consciousness. By self-consciousness some writers mean no more than I mean by self-grasp. The terminology is not of extreme moment, if we only in some way keep self-estimate as an important feature of personality; but, after much testing, I must myself regard normal self-consciousness as having two sides, necessarily interlaced, self-grasp and self-estimate. At one stroke in consciousness you get both an entity and a peculiarity. The instant you think, "I am not this," you also think, "I am not like this." In every full act of self-consciousness, I hold, a person must consider himself as existing-in-peculiarity.

The Culmination in Self-decision. The final feature in personality is the power of self-decision. So very important is this feature that writers with the tendency of Maine de Biran make it basal in personality. And even Julius Muller held that there could not be self-consciousness without self-determination, the two always "making their appearance together." To me, however, self-consciousness seems to be psychologically the more fundamental; and I would say that sometimes there is self-consciousness without any such volition as amounts to self-decision. And yet self-decision is the most important feature of the entire personal process, and for the simple reason that it is the culmination. What, then, do we mean by this term "self-decision"? Whenever we will anything, supremely conscious of self, that volition is self-decision. It is not, as certain theologians teach, the quality of the end-in-view, but just intense self-consciousness alone, that turns an impersonal volition into a self-decision. Nor is self-decision any decision made by a person. A person can will and does will many things, yes, and many important things, which are not self-decisive. I would dare to say that in the last third of the battle of Waterloo not one order came out of the personality of Napoleon. In truth, the victory was due not so much to the important fact that Wellington and Blucher were there as to the much more important fact that, in full selfhood, Napoleon was not there! We are not now considering personal responsibility, but long before we are ready to consider it we need to see that countless volitions are not true expressions of personality. Again, then, what is self-decision? This: Whenever a man sees himself out there as an existing isolated, peculiar individual, and then, in the flash of that vision of self, wills anything, that volition is self-decision. The person first makes himself the clear, full object of his own thought, and then makes that definite point of his person the original initiative of his choice. And so the significance of self-decision becomes tremendous because the decision is charged with the conception, with the entire valuation, which the man has of himself. The state of consciousness in self-decision may be expressed thus: "I -- just this separate and peculiar myself -- will do this."

Formal Scheme of the Personal Process

I. The Process in Outline

1. The process begins in self-separation of the lowest degree; where there is a bare distinction in consciousness between subject and object.

2. The psychological basis of personality is in the power

(1) Of self-grasp ■■■■■■

■■■■ interlaced in self-consciousness

(2) Of self-estimate ■■■■

3. The process culminates in self-decision.

II. Definitions in Approach to Personality

An organism is a complex of essential parts; all the parts in dependent reciprocity; and every part making constant contribution to a common end.

An individual is any item that cannot be divided without losing identity.

A man, fundamentally considered, is an organic individual that is a person. Or, a man is a personal, Organic individual.

A person is any being having capacity for personality.

III. Definitions of Personality

Analytical Definition.

Personality is the power of self-grasp, self-estimate, and self-decision.

Concise Definition.

Personality is the power of self-conscious decision.

Popular Definition.

Personality is the power to think, "Of myself I will do this thing."

IV. Final Definition of a Person

A person is any being capable of self-conscious decision.

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